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ARCHEOLOGIES OF THE POSTCOLONY.
ÂNGELA FERREIRA'S AND MANTHIA DIAWARA'S
MAISON TROPICALES.

Stills from Manthia Diawara's *Maison Tropicale*

Openings

Venice, Italy

Juxtapositions: shot of the *vaporetto* crossing the *laguna* towards San Marco at sunset; *gondolieri*. View of the Venice Biennale setting, followed by the Portuguese Pavilion. Soundtrack: Tony Murena playing *la java*.

Fieldwork in far-off places

Brazzaville, Congo

Negotiating presence: a girl in a pink dress looks out of the window of a shabby house while a conversation between the artist /archaeologist and her 'native informants' takes place, apparently full of misunderstandings. The artist looks around and scrutinises, a sceptical expression on her face, the information being given her. Her companions follow her queries and moves attentively, while locals surround the 'native informants', curious as to what is going on. The girl in the pink dress joins the group, semi-distracted, then more attentive.

Finally, after one of the 'natives' has added more information, the artist looks satisfied. "D'accord. Maintenant on parle!" she exclaims in French, the language in which the fieldwork is being done.

Niamey, Niger

Tactility: the artist /archaeologist touches the soil next to the concrete terrace where the *maison tropicale* used to stand, in an analogous movement to the one shown before in a long shot of the Portuguese pavilion at the Venice Biennale, the venue where her sculpture is about to be exhibited. In voice-off, the artist talks about her intimate, intense relation to objects, and how it helped her to "propose answers to the essential questions" she had, surrounded as she had been in her youth by a world "so fiery, so

explosive, so violent and so offensive”: apartheid South Africa in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Brazzaville Congo

Transculturation: a Pentecostal Church and a multicoloured group singing and dancing to religious chants, against a greyish tropical sky, the cross rising up against it.

Niamey, Niger

Translation: the artist speaks with a Tuareg woman about what it was like when the *maison tropicale* by Jean Prouvé still stood on the terrace where both are sitting. The voice of the translator assures the mediation. The Tuareg woman explains she was unhappy after the house was disassembled. Whether she thinks she should have been consulted. “Could I have an opinion? The poor don’t have any rights”. “Besides, I don’t speak the same language”, she adds.

Brazzaville, Congo

The artist evokes the impact and failure of modernism in Africa, while she looks at the surrounding houses. She points out how a “ferocious”, indomitable, African nature invades the modernist European buildings. The camera follows her gaze: roots and branches, a papaya tree intermingling with concrete balconies, the decay accentuated by humidity and traces of recent civil wars.

Transactions: the former owner of the house looks astonished, when she is told that the *maison tropicale* was sold for 6 million dollars in New York. She mentions her own travels to Paris and France, other mobilities in the postcolony, to postcolonial Europe.

Travelling cultures: a young Congolese artist considers the advantages of the houses now having been relocated to France, thus guaranteeing their preservation, but also ponders on the legitimacy of it. Had they remained in Africa, they might have become a tourist attraction.

Between fieldtrips

Lisbon, Portugal

Similarities: the sculptor discusses with workers the shapes and sizes of the sculpture in an atmosphere reminiscent of sites visited in Brazzaville. The highly industrialised concept of the *maison tropicale* acquires an artisanal quality, visible in the intense, detailed handcraft used to build it.

Unhappy endings

Queens, NY

Shot of the *maison tropicale* and Queensboro Bridge facing Manhattan. The director’s voice expresses his hope that the house will someday be returned to a modern Africa.

The film *Maison Tropicale* by Manthia Diawara is more than a documentary on the making of the homonymous installation by Ângela Ferreira based on a project by the French designer Jean Prouvé, which represented Portugal at the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007.

The present essay starts by considering relations between houses, travel and modernity in their connection with colonialism. The second part of the text adds a brief introduction to Ferreira's installation paying attention to the varied contexts in which it was developed, namely the one surrounding Prouvé's work. The third part consists of an excursus into French and Portuguese colonial histories in a comparative framework. The fourth and final part mainly considers Diawara's film, as well as the way in which both pieces of work shed light on each other, despite the fact that they may also be read independently.

The conclusion considers the ways in which both approaches are able to transcend the national/transnational, post and neo-colonial contexts that surround them.

1. Travelling houses

Houses are considered sites of dwelling and stability, places one returns to in order to find familiarity and continuity after the hazards and adventures of travel, the realm of exploration and conquest of open spaces that characterised classical European movement in the 18th and 19th centuries (Pratt 1992, Clifford 1997).

Houses may also be considered as nests, with their drawers and corners, the site of reverie, less through metaphors than images (Bachelard 1998). Places of secrecy and intimacy, they can also be connected to the domain of the feminine and reproduction, or labour, an ever-ending, circular, task tied to biology and necessity (Arendt 1981), ultimately the backstage, and condition of possibility, for the public sphere (Habermas 1963). Women, servants, and slaves were part of that domestic realm, whereas male individuals, operating more or less autonomously in the economic sphere, enjoyed free movement, as well as freedom of speech, as private persons in public spaces (Habermas 1963). But movement and travel were made possible by the home that remained behind, not to mention carriers and other always present, but hardly visible or audible, travellers (Pratt 1992, Clifford 1997).

In what modern travel is concerned, one would also have to mention the important part played by enforced internal - including female - migration, from rural parts into urban spaces during the industrial revolution, a process also intimately connected to colonialism and expansion, namely through the import of raw materials, to be later re-exported after having been manufactured in Europe. This was also made possible through mass migration from Africa to Europe and the Americas across the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993), thus giving rise to modernised forms of agricultural exploitation and the manufacturing of products, such as sugar and cotton, with consequences not only on the economic level but also on cultural practices that exerted an enormous impact on the places involved in the triangular trade and beyond.

Hence, the slave trade and slavery have to be considered an integral part of modernity and capitalism (Williams 1944, Gilroy 1993), its travels and the emergence of public spaces in Europe. Here, enlightened ideas were introduced and discussed around imported coffee, tea and sugar, contributing decisively to the formation of a public (bourgeois) political opinion.

Thus, across the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993), also connected to the Indian and Pacific Ocean, travelled, besides people, objects, commodities – raw materials or manufactured goods –, ethnographic artefacts, seeds and plants, sounds, as well as texts (the Bible, the French Constitution).

French Revolution ideals travelled to the Americas, namely to the Caribbean, giving rise to the Haitian revolution, complicating and questioning national and colonial interests (James 1989), as is to be derived from events such as the abolition of slavery by the Jacobin movement in France followed by its reintroduction by Napoleon. One should also mention in this context the interdiction of slave trade by Britain in 1807, in the sequence of abolitionist demands, in consonance with liberal theories that increasingly considered the non-profitable nature of all forms of forced labour. Such measures were to be followed by pressures, notably on the French and Portuguese governments, with reduced success, as clandestine trade continued, even in the British territories (Alexandre 1998, Schwartz 1998, M'Bokolo 2003).

The contexts created by these events have, of course, been subject to major changes during the 20th century, namely by women and people of colour having gained access to the political sphere, framing their demands less through universals than through difference, questioning barriers and borders between the private and the public, proclaiming that the personal is political, or claiming that the epidermal scheme (Fanon 1963) be taken into account as a factor of exclusion.

This also points to very different forms of travel and global interdependencies which were not inaugurated (Gupta 2005) during the Portuguese 'age of discoveries', but rather developed through the various networks it catalysed, and which had a renewed impact on the redefinition of the world-system (Magalhães-Godinho 1983) with consequences on the uneven globalisation processes that have characterised the world up to now.

On the other hand, architecture – a more immobile form – also managed to travel, and has played a significant role concerning the government of the (post)colony (Mbembe 2001), owing to the way it imposed a model on colonised territories, segregating the surveillance space occupied by 'civilised' settlers from the one inhabited by 'indigenous' populations, robbing the latter, in its circularity (Mbembe 2001: 32), of the fundamental rights the 'civilising mission' had recourse to in order to justify the effective apartheid it imposed on the colonised. These more or less explicit forms of racial exclusion also constituted a laboratory for metropolitan spaces (Wright 1997). Of course, these boundaries were often surpassed and questioned on both sides (Cooper and Stoller 1997), thus leading to a more rigorous drawing up of boundaries by colonial authorities.

Mentioning the 'civilising mission' amounts to speaking about modernity and the ways in which it was always considered as representing

evolution, progress, against a traditional, backward, primitive space, devoid of rationality or history, thus justifying the need to improve it.

And this leads me to address different ways of imagining and conceptualising houses, less as places of refuge and dwelling, than as sites of exploration and travel, i.e., as instances of the ‘civilising mission’. In fact, houses may be also conceptualised as part of public intervention, associated with progress and modernity, and thus with travel. In sum: houses can be mobile.

These histories of colonialism are intensely connected with the joint project, *Maison Tropicale* by Ângela Ferreira / Manthia Diawara. But they do not exhaust it, as their archaeological work also suggests other forms of evoking and addressing different, complex memories of colonialism’s cultures (Thomas 1994, Cooper, Stoller 1997), as I hope to be able to demonstrate in what follows.

Ferreira’s and Diawara’s *maisons tropicales* propose ways of reading the past that privilege a perspective renouncing ‘objectivity’ and favouring what Benjamin has described as excavating layers of the past in order to attain immediate access to it thus going beyond the empty homogeneous time of history (Benjamin 1991), a form of conceiving temporality that was decisive for the constitution of national imagined communities (Anderson 1991).

What follows may amount to a commentary on a creative commentary on a creative process. But I view it as something else: theory may also be understood as a creative process, as it also draws on a positioning, as regards interpretations of the world developed in dialogue with others, artists, theorists, curators, and academics.

It is also a way of contextualising these projects and depriving them of the autonomy of *oeuvres d’art*, in keeping with a cultural studies approach, completed by a historical framing.

2. Ângela Ferreira’s “containers of history” in transit

Before I develop my argument further, let me start by presenting Ferreira’s work in detail as it was the point of departure for the film.

The installation *Maison Tropicale*, composed of a wooden and aluminium sculpture and a set of large-format pictures, was the result of a commission by Jürgen Bock, who was invited by the Portuguese government to curate the Portuguese representation at the 7th Venice Biennale in 2007. It also inaugurated the Portuguese Pavilion, a circumstance that, as the Deputy Director of the Portuguese Arts Institute, Adelaide Ginga, states in her foreword to the catalogue, reflects “the increasing ambition and maturity” of the participation” through “a unique exhibition venue in a sixteenth/seventeenth century building, in a privileged location on the Grand Canal” (Ginga: 9).

This is an important feature of the initiative to take into account, namely its official status. The same applies to the way in which the foreword suggests an interpretation of the work, when it mentions that “The *Maison Tropicale*, as installed in Venice, will reference the duality of colonial history and the controversial links between Africa and Europe” (Ginga 2007: 9).

I will come back to this statement in the course of my presentation and as part of my argument that, to become intelligible, requires further information on the objects I intend to analyse.

Maison Tropicale departs from a project by Jean Prouvé, the famous French designer, who developed the utopian idea of building cheap, light houses to export to the French colonies in Africa after the second world war. The first independences were taking place, paving the way to the Non-Aligned Movement with its first meeting at the Bandung Conference in 1955.

Faced with these developments, France recognised the need to invest more intensely in the modernisation of her colonies, another belated form of the 'civilising mission'.

Made of aluminium and iron, these prefabricated houses were thought less of an anchorage, or dwelling place, but more as cars, portable and moving, i.e., as travelling houses. The project ended up by being more expensive than the visionary designer had expected, leading to the failure of the initial idea of creating a whole set of transportable prototypes for churches, hospitals and other public buildings. Export was thus reduced to three prototypes intended for French colonial administrators and state employees. One was sent to Niamey in Niger in 1949, and the other two to Brazzaville in 1951 (Bock 2007).

In this context it is also worthwhile recalling that the Niamey prototype was exhibited on the Seine embankment during an exhibition organised by an association of engineers, significantly called Société des Ingénieurs pour la France d'Outre-Mer et les Pays Extérieurs, from September 28th to October 17th 1949, a fact that also adds important elements to contextualising the initiative. (Fig 1)¹.

Of course, in those days, film had to a certain extent already replaced world and colonial exhibitions as major sites of entertainment and exoticism, thus providing an alternative form of imperial imaginary (Stam, Shohat 1994) to the European masses, more or less disinterested in the imperial enterprises, although on the whole partaking of the violence of stereotypes that turned colonial subjects into mere instruments of the European imperial mystique.

Colonial subjects had known other, recent, forms of travel. The same peoples, who were exhibited at these fairs and exhibitions, would travel again to Europe, now for different reasons, namely as troops during the second world war, thus constituting an important part of the resistance struggle against fascism (Gilroy 1993, Diawara 2007).

This may also explain why the French government had become so keen about modernising its colonies (Diawara 2007: 44), i.e., by providing the *indigènes* with a form of compensation after they had fulfilled their wartime duties, though not having been granted the rights of the *République*.

But, of course, there were other things at stake: first the independence movements, as already mentioned, as well as another issue that is representative of the classical relationship between the metropolis

¹ For the different ways of exhibiting the houses, namely in 1949 and again in Paris in 2006, see Bock 2007: 13 ff.

and its (post)colonies: raw materials, namely the bauxite used in the *maison tropicales*, were imported from Africa (Diawara 2007: 44). Thus, the portable houses also provided a way to re-export manufactured goods having as raw material products from the colonies. Hence, they can be seen as another twist in what James Clifford has called “portable villages” (1997) brought to major Western capitals on the occasion of colonial exhibitions. The *maison tropicale* thus corresponded to the export of a European modernist pattern of dwellings for French public employees in their private tropical quarters, albeit made from indigenous raw materials.

In 2003, the prototypes still remaining in the postcolony (Mbembe 2001) were again dismantled and shipped in containers after having been bought by a French art gallery. One of the Brazzaville houses was exhibited on the Seine embankment in 2006 (Fig. 2), and was later auctioned in New York in 2007 (Fig. 3) when Ângela Ferreira was in the final stages of preparing for the exhibition. Afterwards, the prototype was once more shown in 2008, on the Thames Embankment (<http://www.lamaisontropicale.com/www/>), as if unwittingly citing the links between the river and the ‘heart of darkness’ as suggested in the opening pages of Conrad’s famous novella (Fig. 4).

It was precisely these travels and the issues related to them, i.e., post-neo-colonialism, in the form of the sudden emergence of the *maison tropicale* again in Europe, that kindled the artist’s interest in the houses.

Born and raised in Mozambique, and having spent a short period in Portugal after the country’s independence, Ângela Ferreira then moved to South Africa where she studied art and became engaged in the anti-apartheid movements, being influenced by Anglo-American modernist theories and art practices, although the latter only in the form of copies (Bock 2007, see also Bock in http://www.artafrica.info/html/expovirtual/expovirtual_i.php?ide=5).

Meanwhile, she has been living in Portugal, although pursuing intense connections with South Africa, making of her travels and multi-sited (Bock 2007) memories main subjects of her work, framed by an unusual complexity, especially if one considers postcolonial approaches, in general, and artistic practices, in particular in Portugal (Sanchez 2007).

Modernism has frequently been referred to as a main influence in Ferreira’s training and work (Sandqvist 2007), albeit being appropriated in a very complex way, as a form of attachment, adhesion and critical perspective due to the fact that she developed her artistic work in peripheral contexts Africa and Portugal (Bock 2007, 11). It is this perspective, her in-betweenness and local appropriation of global discourses on art that interrogates grand narratives of art history of art, progress, Enlightenment and modernity, thus pointing to the affinities and differences between the postcolonial and the postmodern (Bhabha 1994). By this I mean the tension one finds in Ferreira’s approach to modernism, a mixture of fascination and critical distance that is also a main trait in her approach to Prouvé’s project, and a point of departure to introduce a “discussion, a travelling dialogue between politics and aesthetics” (Ferreira) that “may raise new questions to [her]self and other people”.

The installation *Maison tropicale*, consists of a wooden-sculpture set on an aluminium basis, and enveloped by an aluminium structure, the only material used by the Prouvé she resorts to (Fig. 5-6).

The sculpture was built according to Ferreira's detailed drawings (Sandqvist 2007) by Portuguese workers in an environment reminiscent of the settings in Brazzaville where the houses formerly stood. Thus, the industrialised prototype was, on the one hand, reduced to its more formal elements, as it is robbed of any functionality; on the other, the sculpture was made using traditional craftwork expertise, thereby creating a tension, or rather, complicating the opposition, between the modern and the traditional. Fascinated by the modernist forms of Prouvé's prototypes, Ferreira literally deconstructed them, to re-assemble them again into what she calls "containers of history", thereby accentuating their mobility as well as their intercontinental and (post)colonial travels. The *maison tropicale* thus acquires a multilayered temporality that addresses issues of history and memory that it does not intend to solve, but only interrogate.

The perspective introduced by the installation is not a detached one (Sandqvist 2007: 22), as the observer has to walk through the sculpture, being forced to use a corridor built into the "container of history". (Fig 7)

Immersion in the "container of history" forbids the panopticism of power, the control of space, hence confining the spectator to an inside, *an* abyss (Glissant 1990. 18 ff.) with affinities to the claustrophobic spaces of slave ships (Diawara 2007: 44).

But the proximity of the perspective is further complicated by the grand-format pictures that surround the installation (Fig. 8) which emphasise the absence of the house in Niamey and Brazzaville.

One recognizes mere traces of the *maison tropicale*, against the debris and the huts of the nomadic Tuareg in Niamey (Fig. 9) who now inhabit the spot where the house used to stand. Those who were left behind are depicted in the background, as if abandoned by progress and History (Fig. 10). The modernist design in Brazzaville has been devoured by improvised buildings, the spaces being occupied by everyday facilities that favour outdoor living instead of the intimacy of domestic spaces (Fig. 11-12).

But other stories are made present in an implicit, but not audible, way, as if addressing the impossibility of recovering other versions, beyond those narrated by the powerful. The tension between the modernist forms and the traditional rurality, the modernist travelling house and the traditional nomadic Tuareg dwellings, stresses the ambivalence of the project (Sandqvist 2007: 21), caught between the admiration of form and the critical and nostalgic attempt to frame the failed utopia in the photographs, as well as to address issues of inequality in the postcolony.

As mentioned above, the context in which the installation was first shown raises specific questions, namely the relationship not only between Europe and Africa, but also, and more evidently, between the (post)national and the (post)colonial.

Different from other biennales, Venice still retains the model of an official national representation. This does not mean that the reading of the initiative is reduced to this venue. But as I have stated, I am also interested in issues of contextualisation and in analysing the ways in which these also add interpretative value to the joint project. Hence, in the follow I will therefore be considering the relationship between the nation and colonialism as part of the questions the project raises in this context.

What kinds of links, parallels can one draw between French and Portuguese colonialism's cultures (Thomas)? How far are transnational links to be considered in this context?

This leads to a rather lengthy but necessary digression on the colonial histories of both countries, as well as their association with European history in general.

3. Excursus: Portuguese, French and European colonialism and (trans)national identities

Portugal's 'presence' in Africa is older than France's, as Portuguese contacts with Africans have been more or less regular since the 16th century. This does not mean that exchanges and rivalries did not play a substantial part in the relations between both countries as regards their colonial projects. Portugal's traditional alliance with Britain would already serve as an important indicator. Of course the latter would nevertheless constitute a more active rival than France, not to speak of Germany and Belgium, as events surrounding the 'Scramble for Africa' suggest.

Be that as it may, French ideas exerted a major influence on the Portuguese elite, namely in the late 19th century, when race became a defining element in colonial discourse and practices, something that – to name but some examples – the exchanges between Portuguese and French physical anthropologists seem to confirm (Roque 2001, and 2006, Martins 2006), as well as the type of enquiries used by colonial administrators not only citing French experts but also following the models introduced Degérando *Considérations sur les diverses méthodes à suivre dans l'observation des peuples sauvages* (1800) in the early 19th century². Discourses on the Portuguese civilising mission also seem to have been strongly influenced by French discourses, namely amongst Portuguese supporters of the Republic, thus grounding their backing of a colonial policy as a guarantee of the nation-state's strength (Valentim 1998). The way in which the universalist message of the French Republic cohabited with an increasingly narrow nationalism; the role of historiography and education in making peasants into Frenchmen has been widely investigated. In the age of the invention of traditions (Hobsbawm, Ranger 1983), we can find analogous tendencies in Portugal. A clear example of this tendency is the way in which republican tendencies resorted to Camoens as the token poet of the Portuguese empire, creating events and monuments intended to celebrate the association between literature, history, nation, and empire (João 1998). The *Lusiads* were to be transformed in the national epic *par excellence* taught in schools until fairly recently. The poem acted as a way to build a common national memory around a colonial mission.

This central role attributed to the nation-state thus has similarities with French republicanism, offering a secularised version of the Christianising mission, which until then, was the predominant discourse used to legitimise and encourage the role of the Portuguese 'expansion'.

Of course, one can also find examples of more differentialist (Taguieff 1987) methods, based on a more tactical approach to local

² Thanks to Leonor P. Martins for information on this latter topic. On Degérando s. Moravia 1970.

cultures, more akin to the official British model of indirect rule, such as the one the liberal Marquis of Sá da Bandeira intended to introduce in territories under Portuguese colonial influence, albeit unsuccessfully (Valentim 1998). This was partly due to slave traders' interests, as well as internal opposition, which was at the time predominantly indifferent to colonial issues. This state of affairs was later to change namely, through the redefinition of the nation in imperial terms by the Republicans as mentioned earlier on.

But apart from the *mission civilisatrice* or indirect rule, the fact is that both models corresponded to the two faces of the same coin, as both can be understood as ideological statements intended to legitimise *a posteriori*, or construct discursively, exclusionary and racist practices, which were consensual among all colonial nations: the European right to occupy and rule.

The intimate association with republicanism and nationalism and its connection with a renewed colonial project thus have to be considered. These nationalist sentiments reached a peak during the Scramble for Africa and the British Ultimatum concerning Britain's right to occupy the territories separating the West Coast of Africa from its eastern possessions, thus risking to jeopardise the Portuguese empire and a colonisation process that had hardly begun to be implemented, in the wake of Brazil's independence and British pressure on the slave trade (Alexandre 1998). The fact is also that, apart from the rhetoric used at that time to justify Portugal's historical rights concerning its presence in Africa, there were also other commercial interests at stake (M'Bokolo 2007), as one can gather from debates for and against the slave trade that was ultimately grounded in economic interests.

This tendency was followed and reinforced by Portugal's New State, namely by introducing in 1930, through the *Acto Colonial*, a more centralised version of colonial administration (Léonard 1999), and by stressing the idea of an organic unity between the metropolis and its colonies.

This law was to undergo new developments after the second world war and in the aftermath of the independence movements and the subsequent decolonization measures undertaken by European colonial powers, as well as a result of ensuing UN pressure on Portugal. One of these measures introduced in 1961 consisted of granting citizenship rights to the colonized populations, formerly classified as *assimilated* or *indigenous*, where the former enjoyed (limited) access to civil rights. One would also have to consider the similarities between these changes and the French laws with particular regard to the status of Algerians (Cooper 2007: 358 ff).

The way in which language also constitutes an important factor in identification processes as well as inventions of tradition can also be seen in the importance of linguistic issues as regards nation and empire-building. I have already mentioned the importance of the *Lusiads* in the educational programmes of the time. Besides this, one would also have to consider how much *Francophonie* policies (Mbembe 2005) seem to have inspired, and still do, *Lusofonia* in the Portuguese context, in an (unsuccessful) attempt to prolong neo-colonial hegemony.

Considering these historical issues, one may detect in the subject proposed by the official Portuguese representation in Venice, with its connection to French (post) colonial and global issues, an excuse to address similar issues in the Portuguese context. It gives rise to a disturbing question if one considers the lack of serious academic or public debate around colonial memories, as opposed to recent developments in France.

Portugal's representation seems to have promoted the image of a country which is sensitive to issues of postcolonialism, although framing them in a European context. This awareness would appear to be endorsed by the multi-sited biography of the artist and the citizenship of the director and curator.

Postcolonialism could thus be understood as a strategy to put the country and its artistic practices on the global market without a critical attempt to ponder on the nation's colonial history.

But another way of tackling these questions is to consider how the common project by Ferreira and Diawara may also be read as emphasizing the complex relations and unevenness of globalization and, concomitantly, the ways in which the postcolony is still fraught with (global) neo-colonial, neo-imperial dependencies.

What kind of readings of these issues do these joint projects suggest apart from the vague connections between national colonial histories and their inheritors in what is now called the relations between Europe and Africa?

4. Reverse ethnography in post/neo-colonial contexts

In a very subtle way, Manthia Diawara's film addresses these questions, thus extending and further complicating the issues raised by Ferreira. The film is not simply a documentation on the installation, and the journeys involved in the making of it. Rather, it is also a meditation on its own terms regarding (post)colonialism, globalisation, travel and culture in the 21st century. Although the documentary was only shown after the Venice Biennale, owing to the fact that the director was still editing the film in the summer of 2007 (the premiere took place in March 2008), it does not merely complement the installation by providing it with a context and background. Even if both – the film and installation – can be understood as shedding light on each other, they cannot be seen as an integrated whole. Rather, the film provides a counterpoint (Said, 1994) to Ferreira's work, as it introduces an alternative perspective as well as other issues than those raised by the artist.

Actually, the film was the result of contingency and a sudden 'illumination' by the curator himself, whose role also needs to be considered in the whole process, not only as the producer, but also as an interlocutor. Having first invited Diawara to make a contribution to the exhibition's catalogue, on second thoughts, Bock decided to ask him to make the documentary that usually accompanies official representations. His aim was to have less a celebration of the artist or the work than a statement on its own terms. Diawara's experience as an art and film critic, as well as a documentarian, seemed ideal to Bock. Apart from the decisive fact that Diawara was born in Mali with its Francophone context, and later

immigrated to the USA, it was believed that his complex, alternative, perspective might provide added value to the whole initiative.

This is already to be drawn from the essay Diawara wrote for the catalogue, and which can obviously be considered a part of the project as well, since the text stresses some fundamental issues that call upon the filmmaker's own background and positioning. One of them is precisely the intimate connection between the nation and imperialism, neo-colonialism, in a Francophone and global context; another relates to the voices and the subalternity of those left behind by the "containers of history".

Although mainly shot in Africa, the film is about *maison tropicale* and the search for it, its travels and settings, beginning in Venice and ending in New York. But it also introduces a more ethnographic perspective, not as a way of attaining an objective positive truth, but as retaining the immediate encounters with people whose lives were affected by the house, adding to them issues of legitimacy and power concerning the shipping of African art to Europe, as well as the relations between nation and empire-building.

One of the main subjects the film explicitly addresses has to do with collecting art (Clifford 1988) in colonial and postcolonial contexts. If, in Ferreira's installation, the house is absent from the photographs, in being rarefied to its reassembled form in the sculpture, in Diawara's film the *maison tropicale* is never seen, as the impossible object of all the travelling, exchanges, rumours that it depicts, only to appear in the last shot, located now in New York City.

Issues of power and legitimacy in terms of the circulation of these objects are thus put into play, framing the director's commentaries in voice-off, as much as most of the dialogues. The camera follows the interaction between the artist and her native informants, as well with the objects, giving her a very distinctive voice. But what about the voices of those left behind after the removal of the houses? Are they able to speak? Can they be heard?

The issue of subalterns and the possibility of recovering their voices have played a major role in postcolonial theory. Ever since Gayatri Spivak's (1988) reading of the Subaltern Studies proposals, the question has become a contested point in postcolonial studies. The stress has been placed on its aporias, namely the tension between the notion of an autonomous conscience and the death of the subject as posited by Foucault, thus sharing with Edward W. Said the unresolved contradiction between Gramscian notions of hegemony and subjectivity, and the post-structuralist death of the subject.

I do not want to add anything substantial to the debate, as it goes beyond the nature of my analysis, but I do want to point out the roles played by native informants and their subaltern role in making *Maison tropicale* a joint project. What is added by the film regarding the role played by locals? How far do their voices influence approaches? How far are they able to be heard?

5. Speaking to the subaltern

In the last part of this essay I will consider the above-mentioned questions, adding to them a more detailed analysis of the film. I shall then come back to the interrelation between the film and the installation.

Objects moved from Africa to European museums, thus transforming ethnographic objects into objects of art, making of art and culture interrelated issues through collecting (Clifford 1988), while the people would mainly remain behind.

This does not mean people do not travel; indeed they do. Migration has not only been part of African history in general, but moving has also been done for different purposes. People move in opposite directions, back and forth, as the nomad Tuareg woman in Niamey does, or as the owner of one of the Brazzaville houses has done, according to what she tells the director/ ethnographer.

The Tuareg woman, so Diawara's film tells us, regrets that she and her people cannot find the shelter they used to find when the house still stood there. But they have covered their dwelling place – for nomadic life means travel and dwelling – with the mats they have woven, thus changing the site with their own imprints. On the other hand, their presence also tells us a lot about their mode of living on the margins of the nation-state.

The way in which the film addresses these issues is significant. The camera lingers on the exchanges between the artist and the Tuareg woman, translated by an invisible mediator, whose voice is nevertheless present, as if insisting on its importance. The camera observes and registers the conversations, ensuring less that a voice is 'given' to the woman than that her version is heard.

Interestingly, the director plays a much more central role in the exchanges with the former owner of the Brazzaville house, asking questions, providing information, but also paying attention to her vivid accounts. She has been to France, has family there, but she has come back. And she also has different experiences, related to the house: yes it was cool in the heat, amazingly so; the locals regarded it as a strange object, she also adds. But not only affects are at play. This articulate woman speaking French proficiently also talks about her business transaction in selling the house. She cannot contain her surprise when she finds out about the auction in New York and the sum the house was sold for.

These two women are thus two major protagonists, as if filling the gap left by the house. The Tuareg woman does not speak French; she is not a Francophone and seems to live in a world that is quite distant from the global flows of migration which the Brazzaville woman has experienced. The nomad has never owned property, while the latter evokes business and profit-making.

Their central role in the film thus calls in other oral histories, supplementing those of modernism and colonialism in European contexts. The film also makes explicit how much they influenced the installation, something the large-format pictures do not address, preferring instead to present the remains of colonialism as empty spaces.

The very visible presence of locals in the film generates an effect that the installation is unable to achieve, that is, the very specific contexts in which these absences are experienced, narrated and given sense of in a

polyphonic move that includes the visibility of the director/anthropologist (Rosaldo 1993). Against Rouch's advice, the director does his own voice-off commenting. Nevertheless, his effective presence (Fig. 14) and his questions in voice-off are the film's main features. They not only correspond to what Diawara calls a 'reverse anthropology', but further complicate it, by explicitly filming his vulnerability, his perplexity and ambivalence toward the filmed objects. As a secondary figure in the whole process of conceiving and preparing the installation, he is mostly interested in listening and showing, articulating in complex ways, through sound and image, oral stories and subjective testimonies, from the artist to the native informants and other more or less competent mediators and translators.

The way in which the film stresses the more or less distant relationships between the inhabitants and the houses – as, for instance, total ignorance in most cases in Niamey, the ironic comments on the interest in the absent house, or the contradictory memories of the people in the Congo, from the president of the Constitutional Court who mourns its dismantling for vague reasons, to the former owner's self-interested perspective, to a young artist's critical attitude, or the indifference shown by the people inhabiting what is left of it, all provide a context that completes the framing of the installation. But they also stress issues around heritage, empowerment and the postcolonial condition in Africa.

Hence, the film emphasises concrete circumstances, conflicting and contradictory ways of relating to the houses' absence/ presence, by centring on testimonies mainly from non-specialists: those who have a more direct involvement with the house less as an art object than as an inhabitable place.

The ethnographer does so by playing off his presence, in a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, Fischer 1999) of Africans, Europeans, dwellers and travellers, more or less global or local, nonetheless renouncing the role of a more privileged indigenous anthropologist or detached observer, but rather, reframing and giving unity to a process that is laden with tactical choices and contingencies. Theoretical contextualising is given by interlocutors such as Ferreira herself, or by curators Salah Hassan and João Fernandes. However, the latter are taken more as influential opinion-makers in the art circuit, than as providing a full synthesis of the issues exceeding the context of the film-making.

What the film also abstains from is giving the idea of a stable native point of view as it engages with different protagonists, namely subalterns who, while usually bereft of voice, are given a hearing, an issue that Diawara addresses as central to his film-making.

The complexity of Ferreira's installation is therefore made more explicit. The highly formal character of the sculpture has been made more complicated by the business transactions and interchanges, as well as the translation processes that appear to be decisive for the final result.

Ângela Ferreira dialoguing with Jean Provés *maisons tropicales*, Diawara dialoguing with Ferreira's *Maison tropicale* could be read and interpreted as separate pieces of work; indeed, they function in that sense. But as I have tried to show through a combined reading of them, one acquires a more

nuanced, richer approach to the questions involved that go beyond national traumas and memories, although they are nevertheless mindful of them. This also questions still dominant definitions of art and autonomy, no matter how much cultural studies has attempted to destabilise them, namely in postcolonial contexts. Addressing issues of postcolonialism, migration, travel, various forms of very distinct nomadism and houses, Diawara's project leads us to a final question: how local can, should, one be in the age of globalisation?

If one considers the first and last shots of the film, the answer cannot but betray some scepticism, as it seems to point to the way in which local and national African strategies of representation are surpassed by global hegemonies that ultimately determine the fate of these travelling houses. They are made increasingly devoid of their histories and invested with symbolic, and, more importantly, monetary, value on the global market. Thus, the national appears ultimately as a secondary element, framed by a perspective that stresses the ongoing inequalities between the postcolony and the post-metropolis. This is also an alternative way to frame the issue of the relations between Africa and Europe, still fraught with asymmetry, although less with nostalgic memories.

Ângela Ferreira's and Manthia Diawara's *maison tropicales* thus offer two distinct, albeit complementary ways of excavating into layers of diverse temporalities, narratives, and voices. Through their archaeologies, they attempt to interrupt univocal narratives of the past and present and redress other possibilities beyond those sanctioned by official national historiographies as well as circulating discourses on a (trans)national level.

Post-script: again some stills

Travelling houses:

Congo Brazzaville

"It's strange people walking around with their houses", says the young artist. "White people have strange procedures". *L'homme blanc il est très dangereux*" The dangers of travelling objects. "Imagine someone who takes his house along with him. What is he up to?" "It's like a snail. And who knows what's inside a snail's shell?"

Niamey, Niger

Director: What is the home of the house? Africa? Europe? In the container? What is the home of this house?

Ângela Ferreira: I think that's why the project has become so major for me, it's because in a way the history of the house has removed it from a kind of sense of home. In my mind, even though we know it is well and alive and restored and living in Paris in art for sale, in my mind the house doesn't exist anymore. It's actually lost, it's lost, through disrespect, it has lost its sense of self, its sense of being, its objectness, both as an inhabitable structure and as a symbol, it has lost its function, and I mean function in quite a complex sense. In a way the house is like a metaphor for what you're talking about, the sense of not belonging, and that's why I've kind of stuck it back into the container, and almost feel like it should be frozen into that container.

Chronologies, temporalities

Niamey, Niger

Long shot of the river Niger, reminiscent of Rouch's films. Children play around the shore in a shabby surrounding that contrasts with the sumptuousness of the places the *maison tropicale* has been travelling to, Venice, Paris, New York. In the background women carry water on their heads, the sun sets.

Brazzaville, Congo

Murals dedicated to De Gaulle and the date in which the general made his first appeal to resistance. The voice-off evokes de Gaulle's ghost through its presence in statues, monuments, and modernist buildings.

Brazzaville, Congo

Long shot of roads, cars, people. Director's voice-off "We are attempting to reconstruct a postcolonial history of Jean Prouvé's *maison tropicale* to reveal the ghost stories of the relation between Europe and Africa, the powerful and the disempowered. Finally we want to tell the stories of the complicities between colonialism, modernity and architecture".

When were the houses dismantled and taken away? the artist asks. It was before the war of June, 5th says the informant. No, after the war, another voice affirms. Yes, after the war, the informant concedes.

Juxtapositions

Niamey, Niger

Long shot of a road, Ali Farka Touré and Tomani Diabaté as musical background. Niamey, the "more enigmatic site" for the artist. Clay houses, markets, camels, huts accompany the voice-off of the artist saying how the locals had never heard of the house. She adds though, that some people had heard of it through cable TV, when the *maison tropicale* was sold in Paris. Against a shot of an 'archaic' Tuareg figure.

Brazzaville, Congo

"Espace Schengen" reads the sign, a small shop built into the decaying modernist building, to be followed by a close-up of the blinds designed by Prouvé. The traces of the recent civil war are still to be seen, the artist comments. The lack of conservation due to poverty, violence are juxtaposed to the banality and richness of everyday life: hanging laundry, a limping man, passersby, residents. All of them unaware of modernism.

Travelling dialogues.

Niamey, Niger

The artist: "It's a shame they bought and took the house, don't you think?"
Amadou Ousmane, the informant: "I think if they hadn't taken it, you wouldn't be here"

The artist: "I think it's a shame."

The informant, pointing at her: "Yes, but you would not have come."

The artist (a certain tension developing between both): No, I would have come anyway to see the house in its place. I would have preferred it that way.

The informant: Provided one would speak about it. Didn't people start talking about it because it was taken away?

Open dialogues

Brazzaville, Congo

Besongo, Congolese artist: "I'm not happy the house went to France, you know?"

Director: Merci.

Besongo, insisting: Meanwhile we would have to go there and make documentaries about a settler who took this house to Paris, to Europe. We'd make documentaries and bring the house back here. But what wealth there?

Niamey, Niger

Artonnor Ibriahinne, the Tuareg woman: I feel sad and often think of the house. Especially when it rains; when it was here, the house was my shelter. Now it's gone, I no longer have any shelter from the rain.

Cut

Brazzaville, Congo

Ângela Ferreira: One of the most basic intentions of the project was to bring back Prouvé to Brazzaville and Niamey. Obviously this return is purely symbolic and eventually metaphorical, but the intentionality is to connect Prouvé once again to the places we are talking about.

Cut

Queens, NY

Director: This is where the *maison tropicale* was exhibited in New York. In Queens facing Manhattan and the Queensboro Bridge. I dream of a modern Africa, living in peace, freedom and democracy, an Africa with her own museums, artists and audiences. I dare dream of the *Maison tropicale* returning to Brazzaville and Niamey one day.

Cut

Brazzaville, Congo

The former owner of the house, Mireille Ngatsé, dreams of going to New York, Venice, where the house is now, she says (Fig. 15).

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Fig 1: Ângela Ferreira, *Maison Tropicale*, 2007, installation view © Mário Valente



Fig 2: Ângela Ferreira, *Maison Tropicale*, 2007, installation view © Mário Valente



Fig 3: Ângela Ferreira, *Maison Tropicale*, 2007, installation view © Mário Valente



Fig 4: Ângela Ferreira, *Maison Tropicale*, 2007, installation view © Mário Valente



Fig 5: Ângela Ferreira, *Maison Tropicale*, 2007, installation view © Mário Valente



Fig 6: Ângela Ferreira, *Maison Tropicale*, 2007, installation view © Mário Valente

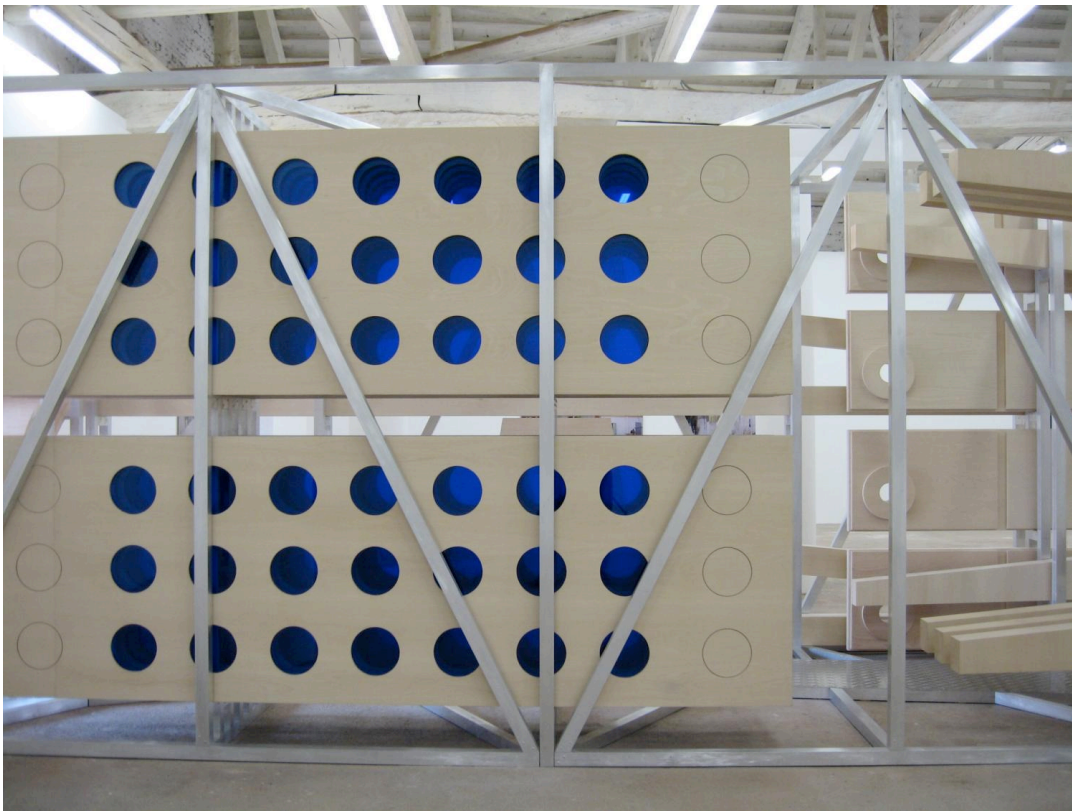


Fig 7: Ângela Ferreira, *Maison Tropicale*, 2007, installation view © Mário Valente



Fig 8: Ângela Ferreira, *Maison Tropicale*, 2007, installation view © Mário Valente



Fig 9: Ângela Ferreira, *Maison Tropicale*, 2007, installation view © Mário Valente



Fig 10: Ângela Ferreira, *Maison Tropicale*, 2007, installation view © Mário Valente



Fig 11: Ângela Ferreira, *Maison Tropicale*, 2007, installation view © Mário Valente



Fig 12: Ângela Ferreira, *Maison Tropicale*, 2007, installation view © Mário Valente



Fig 13: Ângela Ferreira, *Maison Tropicale*, 2007, installation view © Mário Valente



Fig 14: Manthia Diawara, *Maison Tropicale*, 2008, video stills
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Fig 15: Manthia Diawara, *Maison Tropicale*, 2008, video stills
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